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Privacy or Pretense

By William Safire

WASHINGTON — Eunice Shriver, sister of John F. Kennedy, wrote a blistering letter to The Washington Star last week for publishing a United Press account of a story in The National Enquirer about her sister-in-law, Joan Kennedy.

Based on interviews with a couple of sanatorium patients, the story breathlessly asserted that Mrs. Kennedy, a fellow patient, had made some observations about her drinking problem and her relationships within the Kennedy clan.

Mrs. Shriver not only cast doubt on the accuracy of the hearsay, but questioned the taste of the press in running a story like that.

She's right. Senator Edward Kennedy's wife, Joan, is not a candidate for public office; any personal problem she may have is her business and not the public's business.

In olden times, the stretched stories of the gossip press rarely made the respectable press; now, after the respectable press began printing hearsay about the lives of the families of some public figures, wire service editors have had to consider whether ignoring a Kennedy-gossip story would make them seem one-sided. But the even-handed application of unfairness is not fairness.

We ought to be able to do better: If the families of public figures have their problems, let's let them alone. And if a public figure's sex or drinking habits do not affect his conduct in office, we do not have to hear all about them: The public interest is not the prurient interest. (That goes for little-known male spouses of politically active women, too—whoever Mrs. Shriver's husband is, he is entitled to his privacy.)

Does that sound strange, coming from a writer who denounced the Church committee's genteel cover-up of the Mafia moll in the White House? How can one tut-tut about privacy when he has been denounced by Frank Sinatra as a "ghoulish scandalmonger?"

It should not sound strange, because the principle is not that the press can rail at the Government for snooping, while the press has unlimited license to pry into private matters. The question ought to be: When, and for what serious end, does the public's "right to know" outweigh the individual's "right to be let alone"?

In The New York Times last week, investigative reporter Nicholas Gage revealed [illegible] by Democrats for more than a decade: "The Justice Department under Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy rejected or ignored repeated recommendations for a thorough investigation of Frank Sinatra and his relationships with Mafia leaders, according to former Federal officials."

And why did the Kennedys put the kibosh on a hard look at the links between Mr. Sinatra's political fund-raising and his warm friendships with mobsters? Not just because Mr. Sinatra was the contact man for the placement of a Mafia girlfriend in the White House, but—I suggest—because the crooner had entirely too much dirt on the Kennedys.

And so the Kennedy Justice Department never grilled Mr. Sinatra under oath, in a lack of probity that would today be called "an obstruction of justice."

But not even the New Morality has been able to reach Sam Giancana's pal and reported business associate. When the need to call Mr. Sinatra to testify before the Church committee became inescapable, Senators Frank Church and John Tower pretended the only matter at issue was a former President's love life. Thus, one of the only living men who could shed light on the Mafia connections with the

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Kennedy Administration—which had much to do with the corruption of the C.I.A. by the hiring of Mafia hit men—was never called. The danger to too many politicians was that the singer might sing.

The obstruction of justice by Robert Kennedy in 1962, and the equally venal refusal to investigate by Frank Church and John Tower in 1976, are matters that will surely be probed by less fearful men in years to come. We then will look beyond the girlfriends and the pretense of concern for privacy, to see the longstanding connective tissue between the Mafia, political money and the seamy side of show business.

After J. Edgar Hoover succeeded in warning President Kennedy to avoid public contact with Mr. Sinatra and his friends in organized crime, the Kennedys reluctantly did so. A visitor to Mr. Sinatra's home in Palm Springs at that time says that the offended crooner hung a framed note on the wall facing the front door: "Frank—What can we count on the boys from Vegas for?" The handwritten note was reportedly dated 1959 and signed "Jack."

Maybe it was a forgery. But wouldn't it have been evidence of a single standard if just one Senator had shown the guts to ask how the "boys from Vegas" were connected to the Kennedys and the C.I.A.?